DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 555 CS 002 867

AUTHOR Wilson, George
TITLE Learner Verification: A Publisher's Case Study.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Evaluation Methods; Higher Education; *Instructional Materials; *Marketing; *Material Development; *Publishing Industry
IDENTIFIERS Learner Verification

ABSTRACT

Learner verification, a process by which publishers monitor the effectiveness of their products and strive to improve their services to schools, is a practice that most companies take seriously. The quality of educational materials may be ensured in many ways: by analysis of sales, through firsthand investigation, and by employing a system of evaluators within the school system. Two case studies are described, one detailing the failure of a product designed to aid in word recognition, the other outlining the use of an independent research group to predict teacher and student acceptance of a flexible instructional packet. While the analysis of educational needs and the pretesting of instructional materials may increase production costs, they can also prevent the proliferation of irrelevant products. (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED127555

LEARNER VERIFICATION: A PUBLISHER'S CASE STUDY

George Wilson

There is a story of an unusual insect in the last issue of Natural History. It seems that when conditions are favorable, these gall midges breed and the young develop as larvae in the mother's body. They grow by feeding on the mother until there is nothing left but an empty shell. Now, that seems to be a strange story with which to begin a discussion of learner verification and product development. But, the gall midge larvae are not unlike the image some people have of publishers. We're often pictured as a bunch of larvae ready to feast on the educational community until there is nothing left but a shell of uneducated kids. It's a myth perpetuated by people like that testor of electric light bulbs who for $50 offers to tell you which educational software tools are rip offs and which will work for your students. And it's a picture of publishers that is leading to some questionable legislation and questionable demands on publishers.

It's my goal today to try to present another view of publishing. It is a view of concerned educators providing a service to schools, in business at the will of the educational community, and only in business so long as we provide a real service to you. The profit motive forces us into this role. Because most publishers want to serve you in such a way as to continue in business for the years to come.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

George Wilson

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

CS 002 867

In recent years, muchhas been made of the "learner verification" idea. It has appeared in legislation in a number of states, and is an expression of a very good idea -- that publishers have a responsibility to constantly monitor their products and to be constantly striving to improve their services to schools.

That's a responsibility publishers have borne since they began, and one that most publishers take very seriously. But the present vagueness of "learner verification" requirements give us concern. First, because some of the reporting made for the sake of learner verification may be misleading. It would require much more massive studies than are required by current legislation to arrive at any high probability that any product would be effective in any given situation. And this kind of examination of products probably would not be cost effective either in terms of money invested by publishers or in terms of additional assurances to users of the materials. Statistics gathered in any form can be misleading. Who was it who described educational statistics as numbers that proved that something was significant even if it wasn't important?

Publishers go about ensuring the quality of their products in a variety of ways -- none of which are probably "real" learner verification. The company I represent is a comparatively small one, but we are probably not atypical in the methods we use.

First, most publishers are educators in a very real sense. Many people on publishing staffs are former teachers and administrators ... most of our editors and technicians are. For example, George Holland is our

English and humanities editor. He's a former teacher of English at the University of Arizona. Madeleine Shaw is a graduate of Brooklyn College and a former teacher in Brooklyn and in California. This previous educational experience lends perspective to the work, but beyond that, so what? You may be thinking of Sam, the old fellow who went to hear his friend Ed campaign for his umpteenth reelection to the legislature. Following a rousing speech full of political rhetoric, Ed felt comfortable in calling for a show of friends who would vote for him. Everyone raised his hand -- except Sam. The conversation went something like this. "Well, Sam, what's wrong? Haven't I worked to get the sewer line to your property? Didn't I protect your water rights? Aren't the schools your kids went to good? Didn't I control your taxes?" "Yes," said Sam. "Then why didn't you vote for me?" "Well, Ed," said Sam, "what have you done for me lately?"

People, even publishers are inclined to live in the present and to remember the extremes of the past. So it's easy, even for people like George and Madeleine to distort what kids can do, to redefine their skills in adult terms. We use a variety of ways to keep up with you today.

At BFA we like to think of something we call the BFA School System -- a growing list of school people around the country in which we have confidence and who we can call on for advice. We get hundreds of reports from these people. And we pay attention.

But our editors like first-hand information about their brainchildren. So they are constantly taking the new products out to try them in the schools. We formalize this a little more by lending our staff to schools as teacher aides part of every year. Right now, Joyce Moss is working in a third grade class and learning about one of our newest reading products.

Most of our testing is done after the project is completed; that's when it can really be tested as a whole. But it creates a real problem for publishers that requires your help.

Let me illustrate with a couple of histories of products we've produced. The first case is a product I can't show you because I don't know where it is. Three years ago, our BFA School System led us to believe that there was a need for some proven materials to teach word recognition. As often happens, we discovered that need at the same time someone else did. In this case, it was a group from a reading clinic with a program that used color coding to instruct kids about clues to word recognition. And they had students available to test the program as it developed. It seemed like a good idea, so we went ahead.

But we suspected that we were in trouble when we took the first units out to see how our new product worked. In the first trial group of six kids, no one seemed to need the instruction. In the next group, one six year old followed the lesson for two or three minutes then just got up and left. "That's all I'm going to do, thank you." At least he was polite.

So we sent the units to five people around the country to be tried in schools. Educators are notoriously polite -- but they weren't about this project. So it never made the marketplace. Testing products can be a very expensive activity.

Publishers ought to pay for their errors, and they do. BFA is not large, but in the six years I've been associated there, we've chosen to lose $500,000 in production costs on projects that we found didn't meet our expectations.

But consider another example. The BFA School System told us two years ago that classrooms were becoming more flexible. There was a move to accountability as never before and teachers were meeting this charge with a variety of teaching modes. So, we designed a program that could be used in a variety of ways -- for class presentations, for small groups, for individual study in a science corner...everything color keyed so that teachers and students could easily identify the parts needed for whatever mode...pre-tests, post-tests...everything the teachers said they needed.

Sometimes in testing a product we don't trust our own biases. So we employed an independent research group to see if the product did what it was designed to do. They elicited reactions from 39 teachers and administrators, all of whom were certain that the product was what they needed. The research group then placed the package in 11 classrooms for a month of trial. It worked! Just the way it was supposed to work.

Now, in no way could anyone claim that what we did represented a very formal learner verification. But the small trial we made added 24 percent to the costs of developing the project. Sales indications are, so far, that we'll recover these costs about 1979. What went wrong? Who knows? Perhaps the subject matter. At any rate, we've tried again with a slight modification of the package in a program called POETRY TICKLES. I brought this program along in case anyone would like to listen and look and give us a little advice.

These two cases illustrate something we all need to consider. If learner verification in any form is to become a reality, someone will have to pay for it. At the least, schools will have to share by providing free access to schools for testing materials, and will have to express a decided preference for tested materials over untested materials. More formal verification will certainly result in higher prices, and may be very difficult to justify on the basis of cost-

effectiveness. After all, there is no absolute guarantee that a product will work under all circumstances and for all of your students.

Publishers, I believe, have responsibilities to help you by analyzing your needs before developing materials, and for testing materials in development if possible, and certainly for measuring effectiveness of the completed product. It is a lot easier task if you can find an author with expertise in the subject and with the facilities for testing the material during development. As we developed the Comprehension Skills Lab, Dr. Martyn and his team had already surveyed the reading needs and analyzed existing tools. Some things were obvious -- kids were having trouble with standardized tests of comprehension, and most products designed to help could have used a little more real instruction to go with the practice. The American Learning team produced what we think helps with these problems. The emphasis is on comprehension, with interesting new readings, and there is built in instruction -- even for readers with very large difficulties. Now we're following up with field tests. We have tested on small scales and now have the kits in more than 100 schools for study.

I'll leave it to Dr. Martyn to tell about the problems of authors in the development process, but this kit also illustrates a point I would like to emphasize. BFA, like all publishers, is in the business to make a profit. Our profit comes from providing real services to the schools. The list of extinct companies who have

tried and failed to provide this service is large. We began with the Comprehsnsion Skills Laboratory marketing in January, 1976, with one kit. We want to make more. We want to be in business for a long time -- in fact, we've just been struggling with our plans for the next five years. As a service organization, we'll provide whatever service is demanded by the schools that is reasonable.

In the matter of learner verification, the problem is defining what is reasonable and possible...and finding ways to cooperate with the schools to maintain costs at an effective level.